

“Dave’s Comments Re: Budget Challenges”

As everyone knows, Coconino County has been dealing with significant budget difficulties. I am often asked how these budgetary constraints have impacted the County Attorney’s Office. Here’s a short answer that I hope is helpful.

The County Attorney’s Office is taking a 3-pronged approach to the budget challenges and we have worked hard this past year to plan ahead, knowing that things will probably continue to get worse before they get better.

1. Internal Efficiencies. We are finding ways to increase our efficiencies in the office while continuing to provide the same level of services. E.g. better use of technology, streamlining some procedures, eliminating unnecessary paperwork or process. Our emphasis on charging systems for criminal cases has allowed us to remove a significant backlog of cases and remain current despite fewer attorneys doing that work.

2. Increased Collaboration. We are collaborating more as an office with other agencies and stakeholders. This allows us to actually implement new, important programs despite the budget cuts. For example, we have expanded our use of student interns from Northern Arizona University and Coconino Community College. As a result, we recently completed a county-wide "Live Drug Free" poster contest for 6th graders as a drug prevention effort in the schools. A student intern from NAU did much of the work on that project. We also obtained funding from several co-sponsors to cover the costs of the project. (See related story and pictures). We're committed to continuing our prevention efforts throughout the county despite the budget cuts.

Increased collaboration also saves costs for other agencies by expediting cases through the criminal justice system. Last October, we convened a work session with numerous other criminal justice agencies (e.g. courts, probation, defense bar, law enforcement, and others) to evaluate our plea bargaining processes and found ways to improve the quality of information and communication between agencies. There is also tighter accountability between the agencies and as a result some cases move through the system more efficiently.

3. Triaging services. We currently have 1 attorney position vacant as a result of the County's hiring freeze, as well as 2 legal secretaries and our sole Investigator position. Also, a year ago, we stopped using contract attorneys and temporary staff

to help fill-the-gaps in our staffing, resulting in a significant additional workload that has been absorbed by our attorneys and staff. These vacancies are not sustainable going forward without some type of adjustment in our services. Moreover, we are very dependent on soft money (State funds), having 5 attorney positions and numerous staff positions funded entirely outside the general fund. So we could quickly lose more attorney and staff positions as the result of any fund sweeps by the State Legislature (several are being contemplated) and we are doing our best to plan for this possibility.

Public safety will always be our top priority, so we'll continue to devote whatever resources are necessary to the prosecution of major felonies (we charge over 100 new felony cases every month). In the first three weeks of 2010 alone, we charged two new homicide cases and one attempted homicide. Last year, we conducted eleven felony jury trials and obtained convictions in every case.

For first-offense, relatively minor misdemeanors, we are currently developing new Diversion Programs (again, we'll use student interns to help with these programs) as an alternative to the more expensive and time-consuming process of prosecuting those cases in the courts. We are continuing to push forward with other agencies in our desire to create a Drug Court for qualified residents in Page and the surrounding communities.

While these are very challenging and stressful times, we view this as an opportunity to clarify our priorities and find new efficiencies while maintaining high standards for excellence in the legal services we provide to Coconino County. I welcome your input. Please do not hesitate to call or email me with your suggestions or questions.

Thank you very much,
Dave

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